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ABSTRACT

The ruling model of the college teacher of composition has been the "composition instructor," who like the military drill instructor is unflinching, authoritarian, and dedicated to turning students into disciplined writers of standard English by means of drills and criticism. The military pose is inherent in the call for a return to basics, because the basics are perceived as best fostered by a hard-nosed prescriptivism. This approach is grounded in erroneous ideas of how students learn and of the effectiveness of this manner of instruction. Under the assumption that the student's mind is a blank tablet, the method ignores research showing that the ability to learn develops over a period of time and that it is important not to seek certain goals until the student is prepared to achieve them. A more appropriate model for the composition teacher is that of the "master craftsman," who is wise, authoritative, and who shares skills with the student-apprentices who teach themselves by doing. (DF)

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CLASSROOM AS DRILLFIELD: CAN THE BASICS BUILD WRITERS?

Robert L. Root, Jr.

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CLASSROOM AS DRILLFIELD: CAN THE BASICS BUILD WRITERS?

The marines, we are told, build men. In films which purported to record that building, Hollywood perpetuated the stereotype of the Marine Corps drill instructor--particularly in The D.I., starring Jack Webb. Picture the drill instructor--tough, authoritarian, his body rigid and ram-rod straight, his expression ranging from implacable to immobile. Only rarely does a glimmer of human warmth escape the rigorous restraints of his calculated demeanor. Driven, single-minded, hiding his vulnerability behind a gruff, unyielding facade, he is totally dedicated to the task he has taken on--that of turning soft, self-indulgent, undirected individuals into a hardened, selfless, purposeful team, parts of a larger war machine. If he has any qualms about the ways in which he drives, badgers, provokes, and brutalizes his men, he shakes them off, for he knows his methods will weed out those who cannot measure up. Only those who measure up will survive the merciless experience of mortal combat. The D. I. must be cruel in order to be kind--in some films, accompanying his men into combat, he slaps the face of a frightened recruit who responds, "Thanks, Sarge, I needed that." Consecrated to his sacred trust, the unswerving drill instructor is both model and martyr for lesser, greener men.

Of course, every teacher of composition of rhetoric knows I'm about to argue by analogy,that the significance of this elaborate portrait of a D.I. lies in its resemblance to a certain kind of composition instructor, the C.I., who turns his classrooms into drillfields and approaches the teaching of composition with the rigor and dedication of a Marine drill sergeant.

Picture the C.I.--unflinching, authoritarian, his lectures rigid and chalkboard plain, his expression ranging from disdainful to dismayed. Only rarely does a glimmer of doubt escape the rigorous restraints of his rote-learned regulations. Single-minded in his pursuit of an ideal product, he is totally dedicated to the traditional texts he teaches from--and to transforming soft, self-indulgent, confused freshmen students into hardened, disciplined, correct writers of Standard English, members of a larger academic machine. They will respond uniformly and automatically to all questions of usage, like a crack drill team performing on the marching field; they will parse sentences as swiftly and skillfully as a marksmen disassembling and reassembling an M-16. Like soldiers giving up the weaknesses of sentiment, individual conscience, and skepticism for patriotism, timeless values, and the protection of American homeland, they will forego all debilitating pleasantries such as dialect, social context, and linguistic change in selfless service of propriety, tradition, and the preservation of the English language. If he has qualms about the number of students who drop his class, who cannot "hack" it and fail, he shakes them off, for he knows his methods will weed out those who cannot measure up. Only those who write correctly will survive the merciless grading of upper-class academe. His students may cringe at his devastation of their individuality, but they thank him in the end; "I learned more about grammar in his course in one semester than I ever learned in public school in twelve years," they testify. Consecrated to his sacred trust the unswerving C.I. is both model and martyr for less rigorous composition teachers.

You may find this analogy between a drill instructor and composition teacher a little naughty, possibly amusing or instructive, maybe even provoking, but I doubt that you will find it far-fetched. I think you know colleagues on your own faculty who command drillfields in their classrooms. Perhaps, when the assignment hasn't worked and the writing seems uniformly incoherent or hopelessly dull, the call to basics stirs in you a desire for rigor, the way a vigorous march tune makes you straighten up and long for precision parading. I admit that, when I first proposed this talk, I thought this analogy amusing but rather fanciful, but at NCTE in Kansas City, James Quinn made reference to an article in the Washington Post which altered my feelings.

The article quoted L. Pearce Williams, a professor at Cornell University, on his approach to student writing:

> "My method is the same as that used by the Marine Corps. I take freshmen apart and then put them back together as literates. You might say I destroy them. I am a believer in the total assault concept."[1]

Goodbye, fanciful analogy; hello, frightening pedagogy. It sounded like George Wilkerson's delightful satire on teaching, "Graphotherapy," where students are stripped naked and placed in front of overhead projections of their papers. When appropriate, the rest of the class chant "Comma fault! Comma fault!" and point out other errors as they arise, until the student learns by humiliation.[2] But Wilkerson was kidding; Williams is not. In fact, he would be supported by many

of my colleagues who, in principle, are pursuing the same pedagogy. At bottom, their military pose is hardly surprising; indeed, it is inherent in the call to return to basics, a trumpet blast stirring martinets across the land to new outbursts of drive, determination, and discipline. The basics build composition drill instructors, if nothing else, because the basics themselves, at least as touted by media promoters of the "literacy crisis" and their academic supporters, are perceived as being best achieved by a return to hard-nosed prescriptivism, teaching that has, as I repeatedly hear, "rigor," "standards," "discipline," essential lessons that we "drill into their heads."

Think for a moment about the nature of prescriptive teaching: prescriptive grammar, which lectures on rules for syntax and usage, expecting unquestioning, immediate obedience to them under combat conditions--an in-class essay, for example; prescriptive rhetorics, delineating rigid categories of rhetorical modes and models--all charted and sub-divided, pigeon-holed and programmed; subskill exercises--work on sentences out of context of paragraphs, paragraphs out of context of essays, forms unrelated to contents, contents unrelated to occasions, the relentless pursuit of small tasks arranged in order as ends in themselves; dry run writing--composition war games, pretending actual combat will really be as predictable and formulaic as that artificially performed for the edification of an uninvolved judge. These are the elements of prescriptivism and they are all born of the belief that if you push hard enough, if you are sufficiently demanding, you will engrain in your students, by repetition or force

of character or sheer will, all the correct responses to the situations they will face outside of the training camp.

The call to basics can be pretty intimidating; people frustrated by the ineffectiveness of their attempts to improve student writing very often express their frustrations in anger. A person in authority tends to feel that sternness best expresses the weight of his authority, that those who disappoint his authority are either slack or stupid or shiftless. People in authority seldom question the clarity of their own methods; any bureaucy verifies that by penalizing you for not filling out forms you never knew existed. Teachers have often been serious delinquents in that regard; the failure of their students often leads them to blame everyone but themselves--What are they teaching in those schools? at that grade level? in those classes? What's the matter with those kids? Consequently, the teacher strikes out at the malaise he has diagnosed by harsher measures, when in fact the case may call for drastic changes in the measures all ready being taken.

Unfortunately, in the eyes of his colleagues and the media, the more Draconian the measure, the better; the traditionalists applaud the authoritarian teacher for his return to basics; the teacher celebrated for his rigor wears it like a medal of honor; his purple heart is unpopularity, the shrinking enrollment in his classes--he is assured that students gravitate to popular (read "slack," "inept," "incompetent," "easy") teachers because they haven't the stuff for real intellectual discourse. Ideally, in this

system, the best teacher would be he whom no students willingly take. It's hard not to be tempted to fall in behind this hero and join the ranks, especially when you're a graduate assistant who has never been taught anything about teaching composition and are stunned by your first batch of papers or when you're a literature teacher forced by shrinking enrollments to give over half your teaching load to composition, a job you view as drudgery and peon labor beneath your station. In either case you can cover your ignorance of what to do in a composition class by doing what your professors did--lecture from a handbook and grade ruthlessly. Because you have actually little memory of how you learned to write,--it was probably by years of encouragement and interest--you may actually think those traditional methods taught you something and so perpetuate them.

But the debilitating effects of prescriptivism often strike those who should know more about teaching writing than either graduate assistants or literature instructors--specifically, the faculty who enjoy and desire the teaching of composition. The frustrations of teaching poorly prepared students are no less burdensome to them, especially when they are apt to teach three or four sections of comp with no mitigating upper level section of lit majors, students who would perform well if the stuffed mother of Norman Bates were the teacher. Frustration seldom makes people reasonable and a frustrated comp teacher may well respond like her colleague with other teaching preferences.

To add to the burden, the comp teacher is often the target of charges concerning "accountability." If a student can't write, the comp teacher is blamed, no matter whether the student has ever even taken comp. It's worrisome to be accused of shirking your job when students don't carry over what they learned in your 101 class into a new class next semester. It's troubling to hear a colleague exclaim, "What are they teaching them in 101?", even when you know what they're teaching them and that your colleague's assignments invite indifference.

I have felt intimidated by such instances and I have seen others intimidated, as well. One of my peers, who in the past resoundingly opposed such devices, now advocates an objective test in grammar, a test his co-sponsor confided to me is primarily cosmetic, a way of showing the world outside the department that we have standards when it comes to the basics. When the accusing finger points at us, fairly or unfairly, it's easy to knuckle under, to decide that competency programs are necessary, that literacy tests are appropriate, that teaching the basics means doing things prescriptively.

Unfortunately, all this intimidation leads us away from some essential difficulties with the drill instructor model for teaching composition; chiefly, that it is grounded in erroneous ideas of how students learn and misconceptions about how effectively drill instruction teaches.

The prescriptive approach to teaching assumes that the student's mind is a blank tablet, that, if he is taught the proper lessons, he will learn them, and that what he learns will last if, as when we write on a tablet, we press hard enough to leave an indelible impression, sometimes having to eradicate other impressions, some faint, some deep but erroneous. The tablet, the student's mind, is always in a state to receive impressions, knowledge. In this model there are no means by which we can deal with a tablet which won't take an impression; of course, we never check to see whether the stylus is blunt--instead we blame defects in the tablet. But researches into learning repeatedly show us that the ability to learn develops over a period of time, that some children, for example, no matter how high their intelligence in some areas, cannot behave more maturely than most children their relative age. My son Tom, at five, reads at fifth grade level, can behave and perform some tasks with more sophistication than neighbor kids two or three years older; yet in a clinical psychology class demonstration Tom continually behaved as it was predicted a five year old would, and the neighbor kids behaved as seven and eight year olds. Certain abilities are developmental; you can't have them until you reach a certain level of development--that's all there is to it.

Thus in education there are some goals it is important not to seek until the student is prepared to achieve them--attempting them too early will produce failure and frustration on the part of teacher and student alike. Frank Smith points out, in Comprehension

and Learning (9), "There must be a point of contact between what the student is expected to know and what he knows already." For students to make sense of what is going on, they must "relate the situations they find themselves in to prior knowledge. Anything they cannot relate to what they know already will not make sense; it will be nonsense."[3] In fact, once the child is developed enough to comprehend he will learn easily and readily. In my son's case, my wife and I have always been delighted by his readiness to take the lead, to let us know when he was able to learn something! Fortunately, he did some things rather early; that helped prevent us from worrying about his development and thus frustrating it by trying to force him to accomplish tasks he was not ready to learn. Much composition drill instruction and lecture about grammar and rhetoric frustrate students because they try to force them to learn terminology and jargon students do not have the prior knowledge to relate to. When I see my students eyes glaze over as I try to distinguish between simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences, I realize that drill might make them memorize definitions but can't make them connect that material to their own writing.

Literature teachers are probably right to believe that the best writers are those who have read widely and well--I would add that they have probably read early and profusely, and have been read aloud to, so that the resonances of language are instinctive with them, requiring polish in some features but becoming essentially sound before the writing teacher even approaches them. But one or two semesters

spent with classic essays is hardly likely to have overwhelming or lasting effect upon students who previously had little exposure to such material, in part because extensive reading leaves little time for writing, in part because the mind is not a blank tablet always ready for an impression but a tablet always readying itself to receive a graduated range of ever more sophisticated impressions, impressions which cannot be acquired if applied too soon, before the tablet is ready.

Most of us in the teaching of English, as dedicated readers and, sometimes writers, are hardly average examples of the results of traditional methods; we often do not recognize that merely reciting rules of grammar, rhetoric, and usage will not lead to good writing because we think they worked for us. It's unlikely that they did. Instead of being the source of our abilities, traditional grammars simply reinforced the language usage we already had; often we were selected for college or college entrance courses because of our ability to use standard English in traditionally grammatical ways. The grammars did not <u>teach</u> us standard English because we, like most college-entrance students, already wrote it. Rather, they heightened our awareness of certain features of this dialect. However, the tendency in the past two decades to open colleges to a larger number of students and the reduction of student experience in print media helped create a pool of students who lacked the prior knowledge traditional grammars reinforce; they were unable to make the connections necessary to learn and, without those connections, what they heard was nonsense. As a consequence, the shortcoming of traditional approaches to the teaching of writing--namely, grammar drills, stylistic exercises,

prescriptivism of all kinds--became more visible. Yet, since in the past those approaches purportedly taught the basic skills of writing, media grammarians and traditionists have tended to confuse the pedagogy for the skill--thus calling for a return to unproductive teaching methods when they meant to call for a mastery of fundamental skills. The back-to-basics movement was born.

The recognition that today's students very often start from a different language base than students in the past challenges our pedagogy. We are rather like the drill instructor in the film Tribes, confronted by a hippie recruit whose worldview suddenly challenges our own. Of course, we can choose to try to break him, to make him conform in spite of himself, but perhaps we ought to consider whether we can make good soldiers without making automatons--or, to leave the analogy, whether we can make good writers without making more little Edwin Newmans. This is an important decision: we have to decide whether it is the teacher's pedagogy or the student's personality that accounts for the student's frustrations; as Mina Shaughnessy writes, "unless he can assume that his students are capable of learning what he has learned, and what he now teaches, the teacher is not likely to turn to himself as a possible source of his students' failures" (E&E, 292).[4] In effect, this is to decide that the student can achieve the ends of instruction so long as the teacher is adaptable about the means of instruction. Once we decide this, we can begin to look for a means of instruction compatible with the way students learn.

If we agree with Smith that students develop the ability to learn, we recognize that our instruction has to be consistent with their level of development. As Ann Ruggles Gere pointed out at NCTE in November, development is continual, measurable between freshman and seniors in college as well as between earlier age groups. The prescriptive model inflexibly enforces a certain level of performance because it assumes a consistent, universal level of development the student will be building upon; moreover it does not teach certain abilities but reinforces them in students prepared by their development to learn them. Students who do not innately possess those abilities are left behind and cannot catch up because they cannot bridge the gap to initial comprehension. Given the heterogeneity of our students, the various development they have had according to experience and intellectual specialization, we need to seek another model.

Really, that's what I'm about here--building a model I feel more appropriate to what needs to be done in the composition classroom by playing out metaphors which animate those models. Metaphor is not simply a way of making concrete the abstract; it is also a way of defining and promoting behavior. I do not suggest that we all really see ourselves as drill instructors; what I want to suggest by that metaphor is that our students may see us that way--if I can make you recognize the analogy in yourself at times and alter your pedagogy to keep the analogy from being accurate, so much the better. Unfortunately the profession we follow, teaching, while a noble calling in itself, can only ennoble other callings as metaphor and cannot

enrich itself simply by naming itself. For that reason, having made the drill instructor metaphor unpalatable, I probably should offer another guiding metaphor in its place. I'd like to see the relationship between composition teacher and composition student as equivalent to that of master craftsman and apprentice.

Picture the master craftsman--wise, authoritative, his hands skilled and second-nature sure, his expression attentive and supportive. Only rarely does a cloud of disapproval darken his patient response to the trials of his apprentice. Observant, helpful, revealing his own vulnerability by his own performance of the work the apprentice must do, he is dedicated to the task he has taken on--that of turning eager, uncertain, inquisitive individuals into skilled, confident, knowledgable craftsmen, members of an accomplished guild. If he has no qualms about his apprentice's early failures, it is because he knows by failing people learn how to succeed. He does not lay down rules but sets the apprentice to tasks of increasing complexity--whole tasks, no matter how small in scale, real tasks that promote the development of an artifact as well as the development of the apprentice's skills. These are tasks the apprentice can succeed in, which add incrementally to his knowledge of his craft. Only those who build on the knowledge they already have will learn. The master gladly lets the apprentice observe him working, for the benefit of seeing what more experienced hands can do, but he never distracts the apprentice from his primary goal, to teach himself through doing. Consecrated to his chosen craft, the experienced master is example, guide, and companion to less experienced guildsmen.

If I examine my own composition teaching, I find it most successful at the points where it touches the metaphor. I've shared my writing with them, let them examine and tinker with it--a description of an upcoming conference, a draft of the departmental brochure, an assignment I'm trying to write for another class. These moments reveal me as a writer of sometimes mundane, sometimes interesting, sometimes challenging prose, prose they may have to write, albeit in other professions. But even in this observation of my work they are following a consistent course, involving themselves in the living craft of writing. For the most part, they are continually involved in their own writing, hammering out designs and seeking my advice in the process, reshaping and redesigning and learning from error and improving from experience. The best moments in composition teaching are private ones, moments in conference when it is clear the student is breaking through, is discovering something himself, moments when the prose they care about takes on point and power, moments when you contemplate their writing, like a silversmith examining the chalice of an apprentice, and smile over their success. In class that spirit prevails when you see them working in small groups, sharing their ideas, wanting to write for one another, encouraging one another, like apprentices scrambling together through the intricacies of their trade.

For me the master craftsman is the appropriate metaphor for the composition teacher, far more humane than the drill instructor model, far more consistent with the way people learn to write, more consistent with their needs as writers. It doesn't make good soldiers; it makes careful craftsmen; and that's what I want the basics to build.

Notes

[1] Bill Peterson, "War of the Words' Heats Up at Cornell," The Washington Post, September 23, 1977, Section A, p. 2.

[2] George J. Wilkerson, "Graphotherapy," Community College Frontiers (Summer 1976), pp. 24-25.

[3] Frank Smith, Comprehension and Learning: A Conceptual Framework for Teachers (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston), pp. 9-10.

[4] Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors & Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 292.

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